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The Power of Fiction and its Controversies in Azar Nafisi's Portrayals of a New Compliant Nationality

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Abstract – According to Anderson's positions on nation and nationalism as cultural artifacts, Azar Nafisi's literary memoirs show a controversial case study, focused on the ambiguities of the exile discourse and of the so-called imaginative knowledge. Through the lens of a recurring celebration of Western myths of freedom, a series of stereotypes and paradoxes will be examined, in relation to the censorship experienced by the author under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, Nafisi's juxtaposition of political and literary perspectives will be shown as an ambivalent narrative strategy, despite her search for a true self without any ideological engagement. In the end, the explored duality between oriented dissertations and pure imaginative recreations will enable to reconsider Nafisi's memoirs as committed depictions of a Westernized national legacy.

Keywords – Diaspora; Identity; Fiction; Nation; Migration.

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The Power of Fiction and its Controversies in Azar Nafisi's Portrayals of a New Compliant Nationality

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1. Introduction

This paper is focused on the context of contemporary Iranian-American women writers and, in particular, on Azar Nafisi's literary memoirs as prime examples of a controversial positioning between Persian roots and a new American identity. First of all, it means to reflect upon the experiences of exile and diaspora as the historical and cultural frameworks where the need to recreate the self is turned into a narrative strategy. Nafisi's ideological ambivalences are analysed from the inside of an interstitial portrait of individual and collective memories, so as to show the author's praise for American citizenship, which stands for the highest democratic goal and for the finest conquest of her self-determination.

The analysis proceeds to examine several excerpts based on literary symbols, all selected and celebrated by Nafisi as the best inheritance of Western fiction, in open contrast with Iranian victims of censorship. These points are investigated as cyclic contradictory marks in Nafisi's judgement on Americanness, after collecting bad memories and undervaluations of Persian historical and cultural landmarks.

The background suggestion of this paper is that the Iranian diaspora can be considered as a case in point, especially within the context of migration after the post-revolutionary stiffening of the laws regarding education and moral standards of life. Indeed, there are at least two remarkable migratory waves from Iran to America (and Europe) before and after the Revolution in 1979: the first pre-revolutionary wave is driven, for the most part, by needs of better career advancements after the Pahlavi regime's opening to the West, while the latter is mainly due to political issues and fears of persecution after the Islamic government's restraints.

Nevertheless, both migratory movements produce a social diasporic heterogeneity, accompanied by opposite reactions to the relationship between ethnicity¹ and a more distinguished tendency to modernization shown by the second generations of Iranian-Americans. There are also considerable influences ranging from strong pre-migration ethnicity (i.e. Persian cultural codes and rituals) to post-migration issues, with multiple levels of assimilation and sharing of a language.

In the case of Nafisi, the main intention is to analyse how the national/exilic content is re-elaborated into the fictional/identity-making process. This involves looking into the genre of the literary memoir to interrogate the author's discourse on the power of fiction as the «need to retrieve the third eye of the imagination» (*The Republic of Imagination* 17) and turn the homing desire into a yearning for Western values. Furthermore, the parallel investigation of an underestimated presence of the Persian literary heritage – against the majority and supremacy of the samples drawn by Nafisi from European and Anglo-American novels – allows this paper to question the author's process of identity-making by observing the main polarization between

¹ About the concept of ethnicity, I am referring mostly to Hall's critical positions on the supposed pureness of the "diaspora experience" and so on those fixed portraits of a "sacred homeland," in contrast with the multiple, frantic reproduction of diaspora identities (Hall 235).

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a “colorful and desirable” American new home/homeland and a grey, hopeless Iran that “lost its colors and sounds” (72).

In the end, this paper attempts to underline the final coincidence between the author’s self-display and the compliant manners of a new national identity: it is Nafisi’s return to a republic of imagination soaked with the Western enlightenment and its “intimate strangers” (35), all coming from a renewed (literary) canon.

2. About estrangement: how to play a role between exile and diaspora

The doubleness arisen from the globalized relationship between national identities and narrations is embodied by a special observer: the writer in exile, who is probably the first to recognize national borders as shiftily cultural constructions marked by declarations of estrangement.

Actually, according to Naficy and his notion of exile as “a process of becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent” (Naficy 16), the inner sense of exile could be summarized in a patchwork made of several national influences, all arising from a forced absence from the mother country then converted into a new unsettled presence.

In parallel to suffered challenges of exile and displacement,² together with the crash between a cultural hegemony and “a condition of terminal loss” (Said, *Reflections on Exile* 173), the word diaspora also suggests in itself the quest for identity within the invisible map of scattered people. At the same time, it highlights a subtle bond among different countries, as well as between home and host cultures. In other words, exile and diaspora both imply the transnational effort to create a bridge between a transient border of native legacies – made of recollected memories – and the hybrid relationship with the host country.

More precisely, after the horizontal drawing of national frontiers proposed by Anderson,³ the exilic/diasporic writing of a nation could be read through physical dislocations and dual searches for the self. Almost as a consequence, Bhabha reworks the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy of double-writing, produced by the experience of migration, and so by a set of multiple contradictions inside the nation-space: a cultural force that is never what it seems (*The Location of Culture* 140).

Actually, after going through the exilic/diasporic oblivions masked by “profound changes in consciousness” (Anderson 204), the need to interrogate nation and identity gives birth to narrations which invest the present of the writer with a process of dramatization of the past. The exilic/diasporic sense of estrangement thus assigns both memory and imagination the power to recreate or re-inhabit a simultaneous past-present. This dramatization gives the exile/diasporean the chance to acknowledge the legacy of memories and relocate it into narrations, as if they were observatory spaces of a divided national identity.

In a more Brechtian perspective about estrangement (*Verfremdung*) – which means the playing of a role through techniques designed both to not identify with the character and space out the audience from any emotional involvement – the writer in exile involves the need for self-determination through the controversial experience of diasporic/exilic otherness and so through observation. Otherwise, estrangement could be read also as a picture’s negative or a dramatic tension that rewrites the speechless exilic/diasporic situation into a script of dramatized memories, without denying a poetic space. It means taking up a position and a

² On this concept and for a focus on the context of contemporary Iranian-American women writing, see Teheranian.

³ About nation and nationalism, Anderson writes: “My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that world’s of multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (Anderson 4).

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responsibility behind the mask of a *defamiliarized* position, that is brought about by the experience of being forced to leave or by staging the Other's gestures and introspections.

Moreover, after exploring exile as «the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home», Said shows how each narration is responsible for the construction or reconstruction of an audience (*Reflections on Exile* 173): the Other, who transforms the interpretation of the writing into a social practice. In a more postcolonial perspective, this reveals the distinction between “the will to understand” and “the will to dominate,”⁴ as well as between demand and desire, in order to reinscribe the act of writing into the main exilic/diasporic conflict between absence and presence.⁵

Thus, exilic/diasporic memories are not simply naïve reminiscences, but recall screens where traumas stage a subjective and a collective atlas of disposessions. Narrative memories are equally characterized by semi-conscious revivescences, then changed into a new language of fiction. The exilic/diasporic sense of being and becoming “out of place”⁶ goes beyond nostalgic urges and puts the intrusion of memories into a more dialectical field of national identities.

If referred to the positioning of the female exilic self in contemporary Persian narratives, the act of remembering – Bhabha maintains it as “a painful re-membering” (“Foreword” 35) – comes across as a cut: it affects a “performative turn” (Neumann 305) of the same memories, which are rewritten in relation to post-revolutionary and 9/11 preconceptions. Accordingly, memory and narration are responsible for identity and cultural shifting as repositories of the fictional resistance enacted by a dismembered self. The double longing for Persian roots and Western negotiations is covered by feelings of permanent displacement and relational ties between fiction and (imagined) nation.

3. The case Nafisi: an ongoing cultural dispute

In the midst of Ayatollah Khomeini's discourses on women – built upon exhortations to the honourable and respected people of Iran not to make women “playthings in the hands of dissolute youths” (*The position of Women* 34) – all “the slogans of freedom and equality” (3) are condemned as the Western source of a moral corruption. Yet, in front of those Iranian “lion-hearted” (19) women, considered as the guardians of the Revolution, Khomeini also speaks of the Iranian nation as an arena for women “for advancing the aims of Islam” (35) and confronting “satanic powers ahead of the men” (104).

After the veiling ordinance in 1983, the repressive measures concerning proper Islamic garments, cultural censorship and public vetos start growing. Both for secular women who try to resist by circumventing gender confinement in homeland, and for the others who leave Iran, the new shape of the country under the Islamic Republic seems to coincide with an exile at home. In other words, it is the precondition for the theft of a past identity neither finished, nor accepted as a whole. But a new diasporic female self-narrative is developing and if, on the

⁴ Said shows this difference by raising up the postcolonial debate between the imperialist control and the co-existence with cultural anomalies: “There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion” (Said, *Orientalism* XIV).

⁵ In this sense, Fanon emphasizes a state of alienation sprung from the conflict between identity and its masks, between racist disposessions and the powerful use of a language that means “to take on a world, a culture” (Fanon 25).

⁶ For a more exhaustive discussion on being “out of place,” see Said's homonymous autobiography *Out of Place: a Memoir* (1999) and Wisker (92).

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one hand, it discloses traces of a “community of sentiment”⁷ – in response to silenced Persian female literary voices – on the other hand, the same narrative begins to display the loss and the disjunctures felt outside Iran, through the rejection of the Islamic rule. For most of Iranian-American women writers, nation and nationality look like de-territorialized sceneries on their way to becoming shreds of dramatized memories.

In 1995, as a professor at the University of Tehran and a future well known Iranian-American writer, Azar Nafisi sets up a secret book club conceived only for clever female students. After living in the Usa for seventeen years, then returning to Iran in 1979, she experiences both the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. For these reasons, the first aim of those hidden, homely gatherings she hosts in Tehran is to seek refuge from an atmosphere of inspections:

When my students came into that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self The theme of the class was the relation between fiction and reality. We read Persian classical literature, such as the tales of our own lady of fiction, Scheherazade, from *A Thousand and One Nights*, along with Western classics – *Pride and Prejudice*, *Madame Bovary*, *Daisy Miller*, *The Dean's December* and, yes, *Lolita*. As I write the title of each book, memories whirl in with the wind to disturb the quiet of this fall day in another room in another country. (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 6)

Memories gradually become Nafisi's device to mark her own voice among the female students she decides to meet every week: the description of their picture all together is the prologue to a community of thought. Actually, after taking off their veils, they use to drink tea and compare reflections on plots and characters, but with a clear inclination for European and American writers such as Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James and Austen. On the background, the Islamic Republic is the enemy to resist: intimate confessions and literary contents are shared, then Nafisi discusses and gradually develops them into her firstbestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003).

Looking at it now as a continuous debate, it must be said that, from the first lines, Nafisi establishes a kind of unspoken agreement with the reader that memories will stand in for the real facts. The same agreement prefigures her final choice to move to the Usa in 1997, after having suffered censorship and vetos on her academic teaching. Almost as a consequence, she confesses her need to look into literature for an “epiphany of truth” (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 3) that can remove any dangerous compromise between faith and politics. More specifically, as the author argues, it is only through literary empathy that harsh everyday life could be turned into a space of imagination, suffused with “the possibility of a boundless freedom” (24).

This conviction could be read as an aesthetic paradigm or a mission statement for literature, the first antidote to abuses of power. Memories are the writer's vehicle to stage a fictional resistance: “We were, to borrow from Nabokov, to experience how the ordinary pebble of ordinary life could be transformed into a jewel through the magic eye of fiction” (8). But it can also recall a cultural dispute between the multiple faces of freedom and the frightening totem of reality, between Western literature, as the realm of empathy, and the Iranian chronicles of death and punishment: “A novel is not an allegory If you don't enter that world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won't be able to empathize, and empathy is at the heart of the novel” (111).

Truly, in Nafisi's eyes, empathy helps to survive the individualized evil of the Islamic Republic “through love and imagination” (312). But what is controversial is the author's call to

⁷ On this matter, Appadurai argues: “Part of what the mass media make possible, because of the conditions of collective reading, criticism, and pleasure, is what I have elsewhere called a ‘community of sentiment’, a group that begins to imagine and feel things together” (Appadurai 8).

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imagination as a counter-revolutionary power with no ideological engagement. Indeed, when she reaffirms identity in its coincidence with an imagined world produced by literary ghosts, the gap between an underestimated Persian background and the invoked American enlightenment clearly stands out. As such, this sort of anti-Iranian propaganda produced by a “native informant” is read by Dabashi as paving the way for George W. Bush’s speech in 2002 about Iran as a part of the “Axis of Evil”:⁸

Azar Nafisi has achieved three simultaneous objectives: (1) systematically and unfailingly denigrating an entire culture of revolutionary resistance to a history of savage colonialism; (2) doing so by blatantly advancing the presumed cultural foregrounding of a predatory empire; and (3) while at the very same time catering to the most retrograde and reactionary forces within the United States, waging an all out war against a pride of place by various immigrant communities and racialised minorities seeking curricular recognition on university campuses and in the American society at large. (Dabashi, “Native informers”)

However, a more cultural dichotomy springs from the case Nafisi, along with issues of empathy and New Orientalism: her ambition to the purest literary beauty is made of a darkened sketch of her home culture full of victims of blindness and gender confinement. Yet, looking back at the ancient tradition of Persian epic and Sufi poetry, those intimate and empathic ties with literature are soaked with regret for a lost world blown away by all the restrictive measures curtailing ordinary life in the Islamic Republic: “I kept wondering: when did we lose that quality, that ability to tease and make light of life through our poetry? At what precise moment was this lost?” (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 172).

As a consequence, the author looks at herself and at the Iranian girls of her book club as foreigners, who need to merge with Western literary icons to regain a sense of belonging. More precisely, when Nafisi introduces two religious students, Mahshid and Yassi, she describes them as victims of the mandatory veil and, consequently, the opacity she reads in the eyes of the poet Manna is pointed out as “a testament to her withdrawn and private nature” (4).

In Keshavarz’s words, Nafisi’s paradoxical position – exalting the power of fiction, but with an anti-empathy and mistrust towards the Iranian world – brings about a break above all in the essential diasporic attempt to “keep Iranian and American selves connected” (Keshavarz 109). In other words, the oversimplified use of categories between a Western cultural hegemony and the dullness of the Iranian laws tells of an ideological engagement confirmed by the author also when, as a columnist, she writes of Muslims as “dubious friends” who “forced Western governments to close their eyes . . . to their acts of terror against Americans and other democracies in the West” (Nafisi, “Our abandoned Muslim allies” 20).

Moreover, when Nafisi refers to Gatsby, she anticipates another turning point: “the story of an idealistic guy, so much in love with this beautiful rich girl who betrays him, could not be satisfying to those for whom sacrifice was defined by words such as masses, revolution and Islam” (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 108). It’s the passionate description of the American dream as a promise for the future, in contrast with the motionless Persian world, tied to an irretrievable past: “A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic – not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so” (132).

Nafisi’s literary and political discourses flow into each other to underline her longing for a transnational rebirth of the self, but this is shown through the insidious use of the words *nature* and *natural*: they symbolize the misleading extremes of a process of catharsis as much fictional as national. It’s not coincidental that the author’s observations on pivotal questions such as homeland and the Iranian past – read through the lens of an exilic/diasporic disenchantment

⁸ For this historical background, see Katzman.

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– are shown “not so much as a loss but as a lack” (37) in the life of the seven Iranian female students. The relationship between loss and lack underlines LaCapra’s positions about traumatic wounds: they “create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling” (LaCapra 698-699).

Nafisi’s response seems at first to empathize with the Iranian circumstance of female subjugation and, at the same time, to keep distance and condemn it by aiming at another kind of empathy, which could turn victimization into fictionalization. When she refers to Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita*, these novels are not easy prototypes in the highest range of world literature, but projections of a more cultural and political dispute. Then, she celebrates the autonomous reader who, unlike a victim allied with tyranny, is redeemed by choosing a literary diversion: “*Invitation to a Beheading* is written from the point of view of the victim, one who ultimately sees the absurd sham of his persecutors and who must retreat into himself in order to survive. Those of us living in the Islamic Republic of Iran grasped both the tragedy and absurdity of the cruelty to which we were subjected. We had to poke fun at our own misery in order to survive” (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 23).

Indeed, when Nafisi recalls Scheherazade’s tales, she has just introduced Nabokov’s reflections on the importance of free reading. This enables her to reconsider Scheherazade as the symbol of a literary resistance, but in comparison with a Western canon: Scheherazade is the first female storyteller who breaks the silence for those who, in the allusion to veiled women, “surrender their virginity, and their lives, without resistance or protest” (40). As a result, Nafisi decides to propose to her Iranian students to discuss about Gatsby and Fitzgerald, as if they were in a trial; this gives her the chance to insist on Muslim students’ weak points about the corrupted, decadent values of the West. Once again, Nafisi condemns the political terms to which everything is dangerously reduced in Iran:

We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent—namely ideology. This was a country where all gestures, even the most private, were interpreted in political terms. The colors of my head scarf or my father’s tie were symbols of Western decadence and imperialist tendencies. Not wearing a beard, shaking hands with members of the opposite sex, clapping or whistling in public meetings, were likewise considered Western and therefore decadent, part of the plot by imperialists to bring down our culture. (19)

So, what are those transnational roots of imagination invoked by Nafisi as the first source for freedom? If they spring from universal notions of beauty and empathy – that is to say, with no jingoism on the background – they could represent a rebellion against any Western or Eastern totalitarianism. But the author’s need not to cope with the Iranian censorship is denied each time her condemnation of the political use of religion goes at the same speed as her digressions on America: the invincible New World of noble dreams.

4. A new birth between fiction and nation

If it is true that fiction is a functional remedy both to Iranian radicalism and to exilic estrangement, in the more recent *The Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books* (2014), Nafisi reasserts the coincidence between “imaginative knowledge” and American supremacy. Furthermore, the book begins only after reminding the reader of the risk epitomized by the “political power and control” on stories, which are not mere “instruments,” but “provide us with critical insight into the present” (3). Looking at exilic topics and traumatic belatedness, this could be read as an invitation to make use of narrations to dramatize loss and displacement.

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Soon after, she introduces her personal notion of “the Republic of Imagination” as the “land with no borders and few restrictions” (4), where only open-minded people are admitted. And, within some other considerations on this parallel and imagined world, after recalling Nabokov’s words, Nafisi declares: “Long before I made America my home, I inhabited its fiction” (4): it’s the first manifesto that brings out Americanness in its inner merging with fictional and national prototypes of identity.

In the same book focused on Twain, Lewis and McCullers’s novels, Nafisi suggests again the role of memory as a key background to remove the former exilic status felt in homeland and replace it with the safer American citizenship she has finally obtained. In addition to this, the controversy between the author’s transnational ambition – a kind of “pristine beauty” (17) – and the enthusiastic depiction of American excellence best singles out the other cyclic mentioning of exile in correspondence to the “deceptive and fragile” (23) concept of home.

On the one hand, Nafisi’s memories reproduce exile as a loss, on the other hand, they drive to literary recreations as prime remedies to the exilic estrangement. But this way “to take control of reality by retelling it” (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 47) is soaked again with an idealized American civilization: “More than any other country, America has become a symbol of exile and displacement, of choosing a home as opposed to being born in it” (*The Republic of Imagination* 34).

So, if the intent previously shown by Nafisi was to get some distance from the harmful combination of faith and politics – and from that of literature and nationality as well – it is one once more contradicted by another portrait of America as a nation redeemed by its fiction. This happens after several literary dissertations and halfway conclusions such as: “America, to my mind, cannot be separated from its fiction” (6) or “The way we view fiction is a reflection of how we define ourselves as a nation” (13). They both hold convictions that not only prove again Anderson’s discourses about nationalism as a cultural artifact, but also show Nafisi’s contradictory viewpoint on the roots of the so-called imaginative knowledge.

With regard to this key topic, the writer often reshapes the revitalising elixir of fiction by looking into the gap between a polarized reality and the paradoxical but illuminating complexity of imagination. Actually, both polarizations and paradoxes seem to orient Nafisi’s controversial positions and reveal mischievous binarisms, in contrast with a multiple and “magical thinking” (90) conceived as a means of survival.

So, if an atmosphere of modern myth characterizes her portrayal of *Huckleberry Finn* – the bright symbol of a vagrant life, close to that of the exile – yet, Huck’s adventures and relationship with the black slave Jim are compared to the violence of the Islamic Republic: “While there is a great deal of violence in the book, not once does Twain show us a physical act of violence against a slave. . . . Yet the book is not about the search for identity; it is about the necessity of hiding one’s true self. . . . When you live in an authoritarian state, to remain alive you have to pass yourself off as someone else” (92). The sense of estrangement and the traumatic loss of exile are reworked by means of a Brechtian distance from any kind of native/national empathy: only American literary anti-heroes of “a true independence” (110) can show the right *nature* always striving for the future.

On the contrary, every nightmare felt in homeland becomes for Nafisi a dark resonance of unnatural, forced frames of home, nation and identity in the context of a fictional competition:

We have Ferdowsi’s *Book of Kings* – I said. America has *Huckleberry Finn*. Only, while Ferdowsi resurrects Iran’s history and mythology going back three thousand years, from the dawn of history until the Arab conquest in the seventh century, Twain creates a myth of America in the making. His aim is not to recapture the past but in a strange way to retrieve the future. (106)

This resonates with what Keshavarz deeply criticizes about *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and its “unconditional goodness of things Western” (Keshavarz 122), that is to say, in Nafisi’s ways

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of facing “the concepts of old and traditional” (110). But it also recalls Whitlock’s perspective on the same bestseller as one of those didactic “high cultured acts of transgression” (Whitlock 169) where “Nafisi brings Western canonical literature, and modernist writing most particularly, into a relatively accessible space, pulling books into the immediate range of the personal and private life of her girls” (170).

With *The Republic of Imagination*, the author never stops mixing her private reflections with her search for an imaginative truth that could make up with the past, in order to “assimilate it into the present” (*The Republic of Imagination* 114). However, Nafisi goes through another “crisis of vision and of imagination” (112) depending on her new American citizenship, an experience useful to persuading “that the American myth had a certain reality” (118).

In addition to this, while the writer reveals her condition of unsteadiness – between Iran, the country left behind, and America, the one chosen as a new home – she is claiming the victory of the concept of *home* upon that of *native*. For the same reason, Twain is analysed to assert exile as a loss rewarded by the American citizenship, which is finally depicted as a gift or a distinctive, greater mark of identity.

Hence, if Persian heritage is an unmovable portrait of authoritarianism, in the republic of imagination the rebirth of the self corresponds to a successful Westernization. This the story of Everyone who, as Sinclair Lewis claims through Nafisi’s strategic quotes, “ought to have a home to get away from” (153). This tells of the struggle against the American traps of conformism and individualism, but always in the name of the American democratic roots of civilization.

More than anything, Nafisi chooses to focus on outsiders who, like the self-made man Babbitt, are not victims of norms or political abuses: “It is not politics that rules Babbitt’s world – this is not the Soviet Union or the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the state reshapes its citizens’ social, cultural and personal lives” (167). It is the victory of a Westernized resistance on the Iranian victimization: the only false promises are those lies produced by “the commodification of our souls” (174).

Against this dangerous homogenization – derived from the denial of free thought in an atrophic society such as Nafisi’s portrayals of contemporary Iran – the author asserts that “imaginative knowledge is one of the most potent ways of understanding and communicating with the world” (180). But it definitely becomes her stage for an even more convinced juxtaposition of national and fictional roles, where intellectual tensions of curiosity and empathy prove the authority of the American “culture of democracy, a culture that understands and respects freedom of expression, of ideas, of imagination” (197).

So, what about Iranian people’s struggles before and after the Green Movement⁹ (2009) or the cultural and, at the same time, political in-betweenness confessed by many diasporic Iranian-American poets and memoirists? Nafisi faces those unbalanced diasporic inclinations by supporting the cause of American fiction as “unique,” also “in its conception of the landscape as an integral part of its moral universe” (213). With that, the reflection between fiction and nation turns into the symmetrical one between the American promised land and Nafisi’s ambition to universalism.

Nevertheless, when she examines Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* – with all the racial and cultural clashes it depicts between the North and South in the Usa – exile is best summarized by the uncomfortable incursion of the past into the present. Consequently, memory is a never ending story of isolation with the urge to express “the search for the self” as “inseparable from the need to connect with others” (242).

This reinforces the solitary pain of the exile, coupled with that of literary characters and people stifled by ideological pressures. However, looking both at McCullers’s deep tensions

⁹ To investigate further on this movement, see Dabashi, *Iran, the Green Movement and the USA*.

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due to prejudices and at Baldwin's notes on identity, Nafisi decides to dismiss the reader only after facing the matter of resilience. Conceived as the "innate form of rebellion against submission to any force" (282), the author develops the resilient attitude into a worldwide longing for dignity, inspired by the American ability "to stand up to any challenge" (325):

Violence – like love, hate, compassion, or greed – does not belong to a particular nation, but one of the contributions of American fiction is its articulation of a modern phenomenon, the isolation of individuals, leading to a sort of emotional and social autism. Is this the unforeseeable flip side of the American dream? Is it what happens if you are allowed to imagine a future so remote from your existence, as will so often happen, your dream cannot be realized? (281)

With *The Republic of Imagination*, Nafisi realizes her private counter-narration, in response to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: she writes of a dream come true, the dream of writing another literary memoir based on a new American home and homeland. Not by chance, the writer adds that she passed through several interviews to be recognized as an American citizen and, while hardly hiding a sense of bewilderment, she also asks herself: "What does it mean to be American? Is it a descriptive fact or a whole set of ideas and values that one can choose to believe in?" (103).

Then, Nafisi's reactions and dissertations on literary and national issues merge with the acts of a personal and collective set of memories, translated into a fictional world of collapsed frontiers. But within the same collapse – where the author confesses to play a role (and to wear a mask) only when referring to her Iranian and oppressive past – a double boundary emerges again and it could be read only through its two-pronged *nature*.

On the one hand, the supposedly *natural* flux of memories, which occupies Nafisi's present as a storyteller, is the same that bears the traumatic belatedness of the real and symbolic knives she experienced under the Islamic Republic. On the other hand, each time Nafisi recognizes and rewrites those memories, she changes her exilic sense of being an outsider into a Westernized counter-narration, which is alternatively made of the victimization of Iranian people and of an alleged transnational praise for imaginative knowledge.¹⁰

The same praise becomes the main paradoxical feature in Nafisi's adoption of a Westernized counter-censorship: it affects national and literary empathy, in line with the dialectical border between belonging as a citizen and diverging as a writer in exile. In the end, empathy has the last word to assign Americanness the right "to acknowledge the yawning gap between what is and what should be" (294).

In other words, all Nafisi's literary production is based on the key question regarding the intellectual play under censorship and the role of literature in reshaping reality, in order to show "what responsibility has to do with imagination" ("Imagination as Subversion" 58). This soon recalls the diasporic status of scattered Iranian communities and the need to provide an answer to their borrowed life. This is encouraged by Nafisi as a deeper, inner dimension in continuity with Bhabha's "Third Space" (*The Location of Culture* 37), but in fact it is never separated from its political consequences. Moreover, if it is true that literature doesn't know time limits, the process of empathy implies both a metanarrative reflection and the author's ambition to an ideal homeland with the blessed features of the United States of America.

Accordingly, the seven Persian girls portrayed in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* emerge only through portions of their secret lives: the hidden diaries they write all seem to focus on Nabokov, Austen, Fitzgerald and James's fictional worlds as literary pretexts to recreate the sense of alienation Nafisi felt before moving to the USA. So, if the so called best american and european narratives question "traditions and expectations" (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 94), they

¹⁰ See also Corbin's mystical perspective on "imaginative knowledge" conceived as a universal function to free imagination and transform things into symbols (Corbin; Insolera 43).

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also give evidence to a kind of privileged exile that is one with the American provision of democratic rights and beliefs. The imagery coming from the novels examined by Nafisi and the young Iranian readers of her book club both grow as synonyms for a counter-revolutionary perspective, where Western ideals coincide with a granted, hegemonic nationality, so that the Iranian portrayal is of a hopeless foreclosure and apathy.¹¹

Moreover, when Nafisi tells of Mr. Bahri – one of her male students at the University of Tehran – she distinguishes him by surname, even though he gradually represents an exception. Bahri has written one of the best essays on *Huckleberry Finn*, yet he's anchored to a gloomy digression, an indefinite dark side of restlessness Nafisi doesn't really explain. We could assume this depends on the fact he's explicitly Muslim, so his faith is the premise to the author's ideological suspicion:

Mr. Bahri, who was at first reserved and reluctant to talk in class, began after our meeting to make insightful remarks. . . . Sometimes he seemed to me like a child just beginning to walk, testing the ground and discovering unknown potentials within himself. He was also at this time becoming increasingly immersed in politics. . . . His movements had gained an urgency, his eyes purpose and determination. . . . Where do your loyalties lie, Mr. Bahri, with Islam or the state? I was not unfond of Mr. Bahri, and yet I developed a habit of blaming him and holding him responsible for everything that went wrong. He was baffled by Hemingway, felt ambivalent about Fitzgerald, loved Twain and thought we should have a national writer like him. I loved and admired Twain but thought all writers were national writers and that there was no such thing as a National Writer. (98)

Starting from a vague sense of maternal protection, Nafisi comes to an unconscious admission: Bahri's ideological ambiguity is the mirror to reflect again upon nation and nationalism in literature. It's another step to foster America's superiority through its well-known writers, but if we compare this excerpt to several others in *The Republic of Imagination* – where Nafisi explores the more general conflict between Southern and Northern American writers – she finds refuge in “the magic eye of fiction” (8) with no apparent national boundaries.

In truth, the American dream Nafisi has nurtured in Tehran changes the concept of nation into a more paradigmatic projection of her private imagination and beliefs. The New World goes on representing a primacy with no rivals in history, politics and literature, as if she is asserting: “the category of the West serves positively as the embodiment of the imagined historical culmination of all rationality and progress . . . or as a supreme ‘world of reason’ that Iranians have until now historically misunderstood and failed to appreciate.”¹²

As the author has shown before, while reflecting upon James's characters, the right to a free knowledge includes an increased paradox: all the egalitarian urges she pursues in her diasporic life boil down to an overt emulation, a *Westphilia* (Mirsepassi 169) or impersonation/dramatization of the strongest. As such, from *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to *The Republic of Imagination*, an “aesthetic-political manifesto” (Bennet 107) recurs in order to give an ideological weight to the repeated assumption of the “realm of imagination and ideas” (*The Republic of Imagination* 22).

We could read all this as Nafisi's theorization of Western pledge of democracy-building via multiple literary icons. The protagonists of world-famous Western novels appear as “inventors” of humanity, they teach how to break with the ancestral Iranian clash between private and public spheres “in a very practical sense, indispensable to the formation of a democratic society” (12). Not by chance, the first inspirational title for a second memoir – following the

¹¹ On gender homologation and fears of Islamophobia, Bahramitash writes: “the representation of subaltern women as a homogeneous group is highly problematic and often ends up with the exclusion of the real subalterns” (Bahramitash 232).

¹² For the concept of ideological failure, see Mirsepassi 170.

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success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* – should have been *Becoming an American*, then turned by Nafisi into an extended portrayal of America as a reward for uprooted people.

It reminds of an (un)natural, reversed selection of human beings, sprung from the experience of exile, as well as from those transnational diasporic networks of people actually living at the margins. The lonely characters created by Twain or McCullers function as sentinels of the magic orchard of the American way of life: “We need to remember that, despite the prevalent attitude today that arrogantly defines success as money, the real heroes of this nation’s fictional landscapes are vagrants, marginal and subversive” (30). With “nation’s fictional,” Nafisi not only demonstrates to join national and literary Western issues, but she goes further and enhances seeming examples of disrupted identities as fictional/real models for the other exiles, the ones healed and regimentalized by the American rule. Yet, the author draws a self-portrait that is close to a multi-layered puzzle, where language participates in suspended times and spaces, with the only relief of more comfortable habits after the defeat of defamiliarized practices.

Vagueness is a past condition and it serves the nth celebration of naturalized people in the form of a new Darwinism. We could imagine Nafisi expresses it in a reiterated manifesto she has already conceived by using the first person plural: “We belonged to two languages, simultaneously reminding us of the country we had left behind and the one we had chosen to make our new home. More than anything else, it was that ready access to two languages, to their poetry and fiction, to their cultures, vague as that term might seem, that provided us with a temporary feeling of stability” (41).

However, after confessing a feeling of doubleness, the other exilic/diasporic condition Nafisi can’t control is the passing of time and it affects all the literary lives she passes through both as a passionate scholar and as a Westernized reader. To some extent, she’s trying to fill the gap with an old self to rewrite or to revive: “The price one pays when choosing exile is the loss of so much that defines you as an individual. The only thing that makes this immense loss tolerable is the discovery of a self you did not know existed – of a true independence. That is the real gift of America, not its fabled wealth and prosperity” (110-111).

The paradox goes on and it embraces a renewed self split into the one Nafisi builds upon literary mirroring and within a more institutional framework of fresh identity papers. The growing mixing of fictional prototypes and national belonging reaffirms the Western canon of a moral rectitude, in comparison with an Iranian background of insane and failed revolutions. Furthermore, the author ends up by pronouncing an act of loyalty to the American myth of prosperity, her ultimate marriage:

I had concluded that to choose a new citizenship is like choosing a partner: it is a choice that binds you, for better and for worse, in sickness and wealth. . . . I felt that I had the power to do a little “civilizing” of my own, and this was for me the most exciting aspect of becoming American. . . . And yet there was another aspect to becoming American: I could be an American without casting off Iran. In fact, to be an American you do not cast off the past, but assimilate it into the present. (111-115)

We could sum up the symbolic extent of the writer’s Americanness into the shape-shifting from a transient identity, to a secure, gratifying citizenship “free of the destructive weight of conventions and expectations” (115). Nafisi’s Persian past still tastes like a bad incursion, an endless infestation that occurs through personal and collective memories she repeatedly tries to “assimilate into the present” (115).

It’s again the abstract assertion of an early difference, an original Iranian guilt to justify the universalistic tension to “a country founded on the noble dream that everyone should be free to pursue happiness, whatever that may be” (124). A declared “real-life model” (153) comes with interrogations of the American materialism arising from its national literature and, once

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more, the same model shows how fictional contributions are brought “into the arena of public discourse” (159). So, if Huck embodies the challenge to standardization of individuals, Babbitt epitomizes victimization: they represent opposite reactions to the Western rule.

In Nafisi’s eyes, this contraposition is best shown by those “paradoxes of being an American, or of life in a democracy” (165), that’s to say, by different rights to choose at odds with the subaltern Iranian condition, where there are no rights, not even choices. However, the climax growing into geopolitical words like *power*, *right*, *public*, *discourse* begins also with *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and so with the transition from memories to their written function. Actually, all the author’s writing brings in itself several traumatic marks, as well as compromises between their latency and the ability to change it into a pervasive theory of national/fictional issues.

“This point is where Shahrzad enters” (“Imagination as Subversion” 61), she writes, as if trying to elaborate her research of a literary truth beyond the conflict between public tradition and personal power:

Rather than left to contemplation and inspiration, reality was created and shaped according to the dictates of those who held the power to define things for others. This, then, was my predicament: How is one to act under restrictive circumstances? How is one to be a woman? A scholar? A reader of works of art? The opposition provided no answer. . . . I discovered that my dilemma, no matter how directly related to my daily life, could only be answered inadequately by that life. Reality can only be experienced and analysed as it changes, and it cannot change without recreating itself through the mirror of imagination. (60)

In the middle, Nafisi alternately deals with matters of female body, in order to point out what she considers as the anonymous Iranian women’s profile. It’s another difference that reintroduces the stereotyped issue of contrasting Western and Eastern dictates, as well as the role of words as intellectual weapons of resistance, but these are fit only for the purposes of American women or of those Iranian women ready to become Americans. The same discourses on identity transition and narrative recreation flow into another elitism, an advantaged perspective for which, according to Whitlock, “reading the right books is a sign of aesthetic taste and cultivation, individual integrity and sensitivity” (Whitlock 169).

Thus, after mixing aesthetical, geopolitical and literary canons, Nafisi moves on reproducing the ideal and real praxis of Western mirroring as the rightest answer to any national turmoil. It leads, above all, to absolve paradoxical American models and trends by means of cleansed memoirs that are hybridized and filled with a self-narrative on gender and genres issues. In the end, we could examine Nafisi’s process of identity repositioning and negotiation also as a double dramatization made of psychoanalytical transfert and national/fictional oaths of integrity.

At this stage, any (female) reader could take a step back again to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, especially to the key role of Scheherazade and the distinction displayed between two types of women. Here Nafisi deploys her first theoretical set of *Westphilia* and provides adamant convictions upon women living under a despotic regime: “Before Scheherazade enters the scene, the women in the story are divided into those who betray and then are killed (the queen) and those who are killed before they have a chance to betray (the virgins). The virgins, who, unlike Scheherazade, have no voice in the story, are mostly ignored by the critics. Their silence, however, is significant” (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 19).

The female readers’ book club in Tehran consists both of *virgins* and *queens*, those who decide to rebel and those who cannot and prefer to be silent. But what’s in the middle? Is there another changing nuance or Nafisi seems to ignore it only to bring out the American dream? Between *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *The Republic of Imagination* – and so on with the more private memoir *Things I’ve Been Silent About* (2008) – the silence is a double-edged tool after that of imagination. Moreover, Nafisi denies the consequences of not considering its inner power as a response, a resilience and a hidden magic.

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As written before, the black and white picture of the young Iranian women appears as a coloured depiction of revolutionary feelings only after their unveiling in the house of literature. Manna, Mahshid, Nassrin, Yassi, Azin, Mitra and Sanaz all affect the reader's gaze, even after Nafisi confesses her «borrowed life» and shares the need to fix it into the American rhetorical persuasion. The seven-minded model is thus converted into the celebration of a citizenship nurtured with academic lectures apparently free of dogmatism. Indeed, an early sense of exilic estrangement and isolation produces a second locked readers' club: Nafisi is the only participant and she spreads the Western voice in the guise of a newborn Scheherazade with Iranian family legacies and an American passport.

This is also the celebration of a prototype “of post-Enlightenment civility,” every time it “alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 86). Nafisi condones all the risks of a Westernization or “commodification of souls” (*The Republic of Imagination* 174), to sign up to the highest “state of civilization” (194). Iran is drawn in parallel into a map of terror and its victims are plunged into a changeless portrait waiting for an impossible democracy:

Words, ideas – they can be quite powerful, at least as powerful as math and science. They move people to dream and do exceptional things. . . . To a writer, a philosopher, a teacher, a musician or an artist, freedom of expression is like bread and water – it is what without which they cannot survive. This is why in every tyrannical society, they become the first targets and are the first to raise their voices. . . . What these societies lack – what citizens in Iran and China go to jail and are tortured for, what tyrants are afraid of when they talk about Western democracies – is not technology or scientific prowess but a culture of democracy, a culture that understands and respects freedom of expression, of ideas, of imagination. (192-196)

The exalted American narration comes from a deeper historical reflection to the roots of humanity: Nafisi carries it out with the eyes of a citizen who's starting to heal an injured past and, contemporarily, she reinforces prejudices on the Iranian divide between public and private worlds. With Nussbaum¹³ we could say that she speaks as a “citizen of the world,” actually, Nafisi doesn't aim at creating a commonality. Indeed, she's a painful witness of the post-revolutionary censures in Iran and, ultimately, her portrayal of the American nationality consists of a borrowed way of being with “all the risks and rewards of fiction and of life” (328).

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¹³ See Nussbaum.

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